



# Aging in Place: Livable Communities Present a Viable Option

Nina M. Silverstein Ph.D., Judith Griffin M.S., Elizabeth Johns M.S.  
College of Public and Community Service • University of Massachusetts Boston



## What's new?

How prepared are communities for the increasing numbers of older adults wishing to age in place? AARPs Livable Communities Guide presents a useful strategy for examining the special features of communities that make aging in place a viable option. A convenience sample of 7 communities in Massachusetts was studied in conjunction with undergraduate gerontology classes in 2006 & 2007. Phase 2 is reported here. The survey instruments were adapted from the AARP Evaluation Guide(2005). The 9 domains were Drivability, Walkability, Mobility Options, Health Services, Housing, Shopping, Neighborhood Safety, Recreation & Culture, & Caring Community. In addition, a survey on Emergency Preparedness was added. Monson, Quincy, Brockton and Plymouth all had special attributes. Brockton was strong in health care with neighborhood health centers, elder services, & many medical offices. Quincy has 944+ units of state & federal housing plus 1,000+ units of non profit elder housing. Plymouth has many mom & pop stores, large chain stores, & small convenient stores that are handicap accessible with mobility aids. Monson, a rural community, has 71% of elders living in single family homes. Drivability & walkability options varied across communities & suggestions to improve these features were offered. All communities were viewed as caring by the student observers. Overall the study demonstrated the utility of the AARP evaluation tools for use by community groups interested in strategic planning for aging in place.

## Why is it important?

The innovation is incorporating the use of AARP resources as a service learning action-research experience for gerontology undergraduates.

## Methodology

Utilizing a modified Livable Communities survey developed in 2005 by AARP, in 2006 and 2007 undergraduate and certificate students in gerontology formed into teams of 2-6 students to investigate seven diverse Massachusetts communities.

Towns were evaluated on areas of livability identified by AARP: Community Support, Drivability, Health Care, Housing, Neighborhood Safety, Recreational and Cultural Opportunities, Shopping, Transportation, and Walkability. Emergency Preparedness was added to the 2007 community survey.

Data collection included 95 in-person interviews and extensive field observations. Communities were given summary scores on the ten indicators based on consensus scoring.

Altogether, the seven teams committed between 80 and 187 hours to data collection, and spent an average of 124 hours in each community.

## Recommendations to Communities

### Caring Communities

- Increase strategies to address homelessness

### Drivability

- Need more median strips to minimize nighttime glare
- Need more reflectors to mark driving lanes

### Emergency Services

- Increase communication between department heads with respect to emergency plans

### Health Care

- Increase availability of adult day and respite care services
- Need programs to address mental health and alcohol abuse
- Health care providers increase accommodations for patients with physical disabilities

### Housing

- Need more affordable housing

### Neighborhood Safety

- Offer programs to alert seniors to mail fraud
- Offer protections against predatory lenders and vendors
- Increase strategies to ensure personal safety

### Recreational / Cultural Opportunities

- Increase elder awareness of available programs

### Shopping

- Offer local delivery of grocery and pharmaceuticals

### Transportation

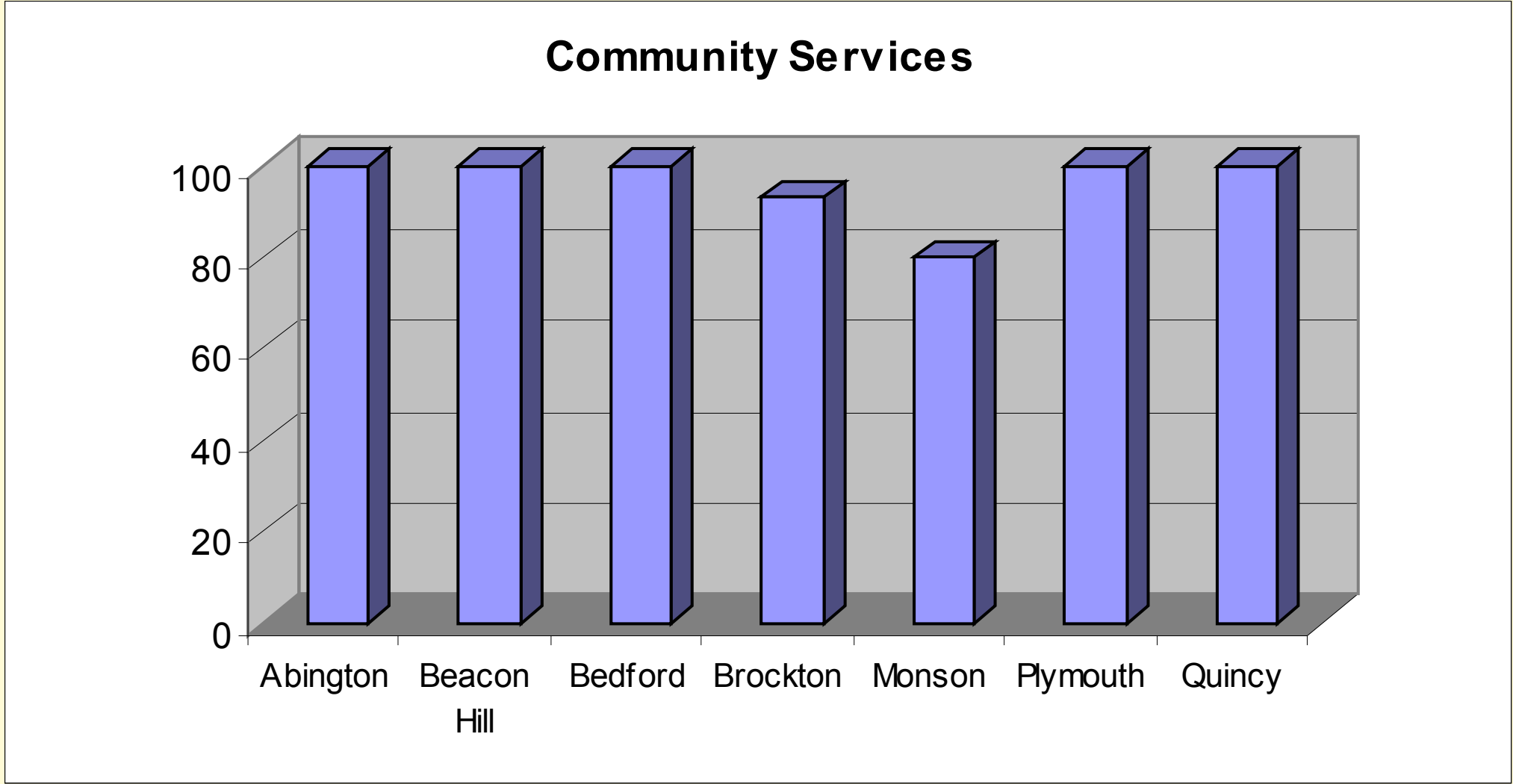
- Offer better public transportation options in rural areas
- Increase supportive transportation options

### Walkability

- Add better lighting at pedestrian crosswalks
- Add more textured crosswalks for the visually impaired
- Add more benches and shady areas along walkways
- Enforce snow removal from sidewalks

## Recommendations to AARP

- Expand the Neighborhood Safety survey to include questions about personal safety, mail fraud, and predatory vendors
- Include a survey on Emergency Preparedness and consider adapting the UMass survey to include handling of hazardous waste and natural disasters
- Expand the Livable Communities assessment to consider focus groups as an alternate mode for data collection
- Review the survey fit for culturally diverse communities
- Encourage states to follow federal recommendations in the *Highway Design Handbook for Older Drivers and Pedestrians* (USDOT FHWA-RD-01-103)
- Add a section on strategies for analysis to the *Evaluation Guide*



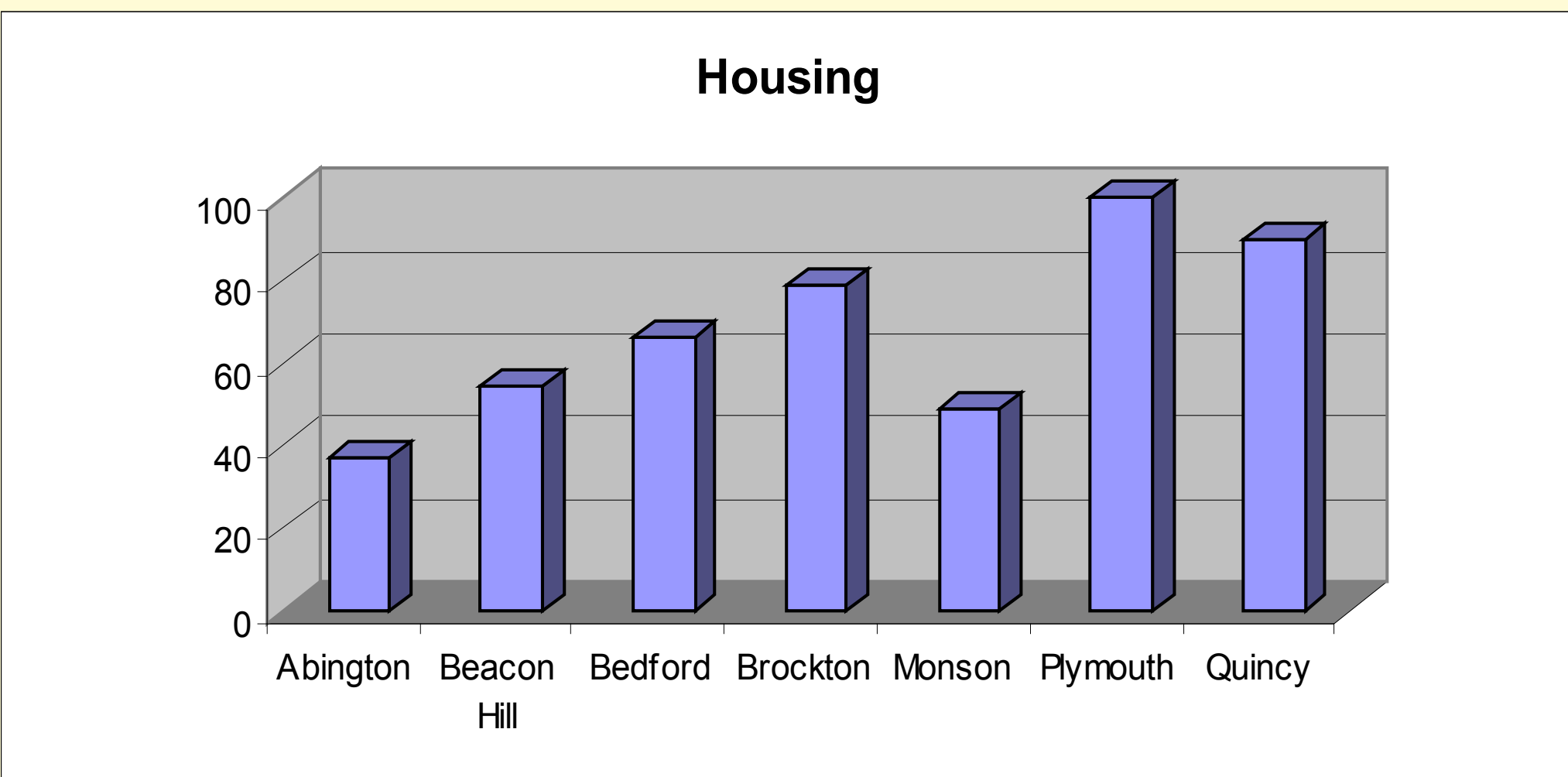
### Positive Features

- Information hotlines; services directories
- Volunteer services
- Caregiver support groups
- Meals on Wheels; congregate meals
- Elder abuse hotline

- Home maintenance services
- Elder legal services
- Social opportunities

### Challenges

- Limited services in rural area

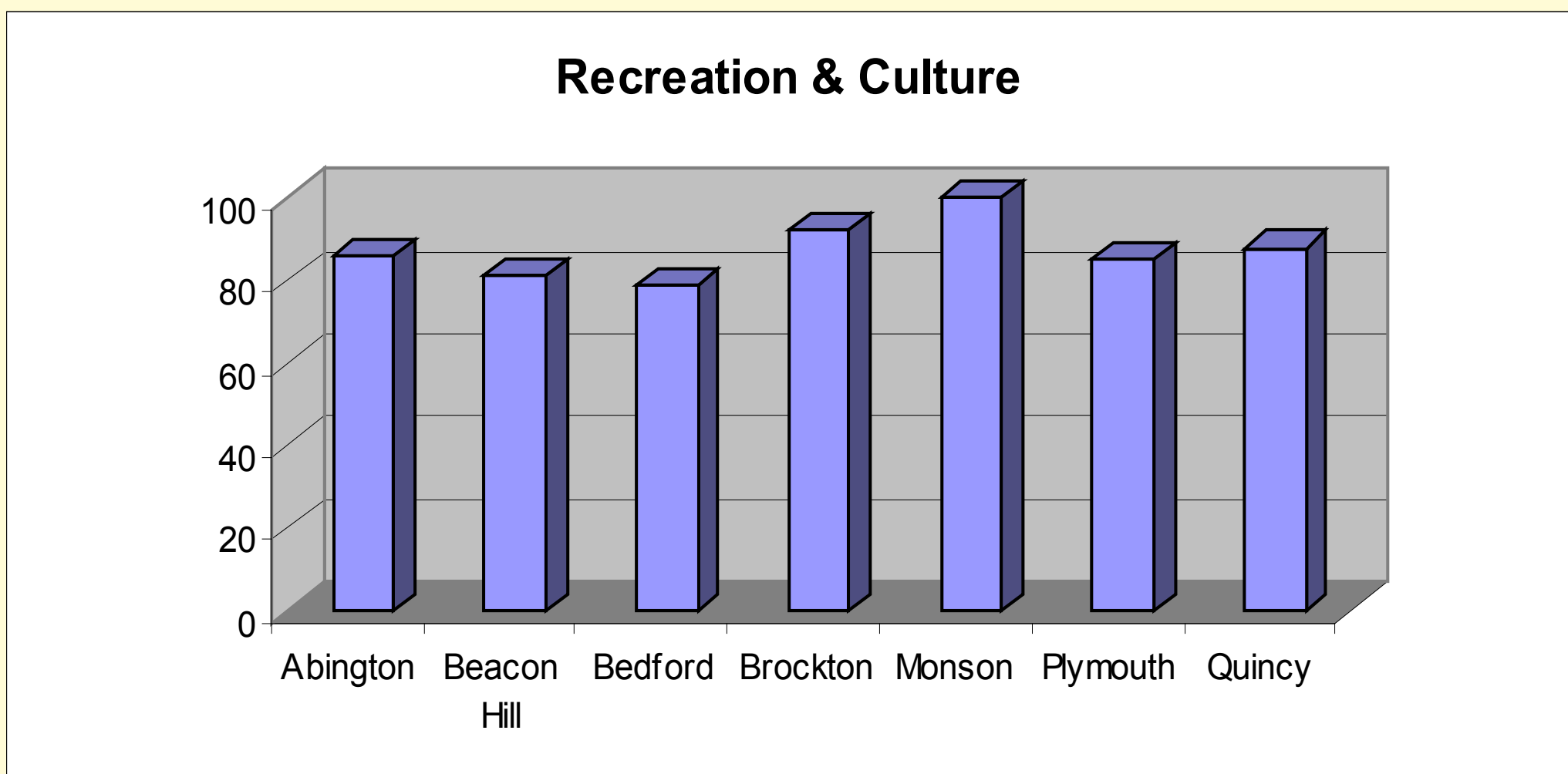


### Positive Features

- A range of housing options available
- Accessory dwelling units allowed
- Property tax relief programs available
- Home maintenance assistance offered (e.g., home weatherization)
- Senior housing located in proximity to shopping, transportation
- Federal and state subsidized units available

### Challenges

- Insufficient affordable housing
- Universal design not yet commonplace
- Near-poor do not qualify for subsidies
- Home maintenance programs not available in every community



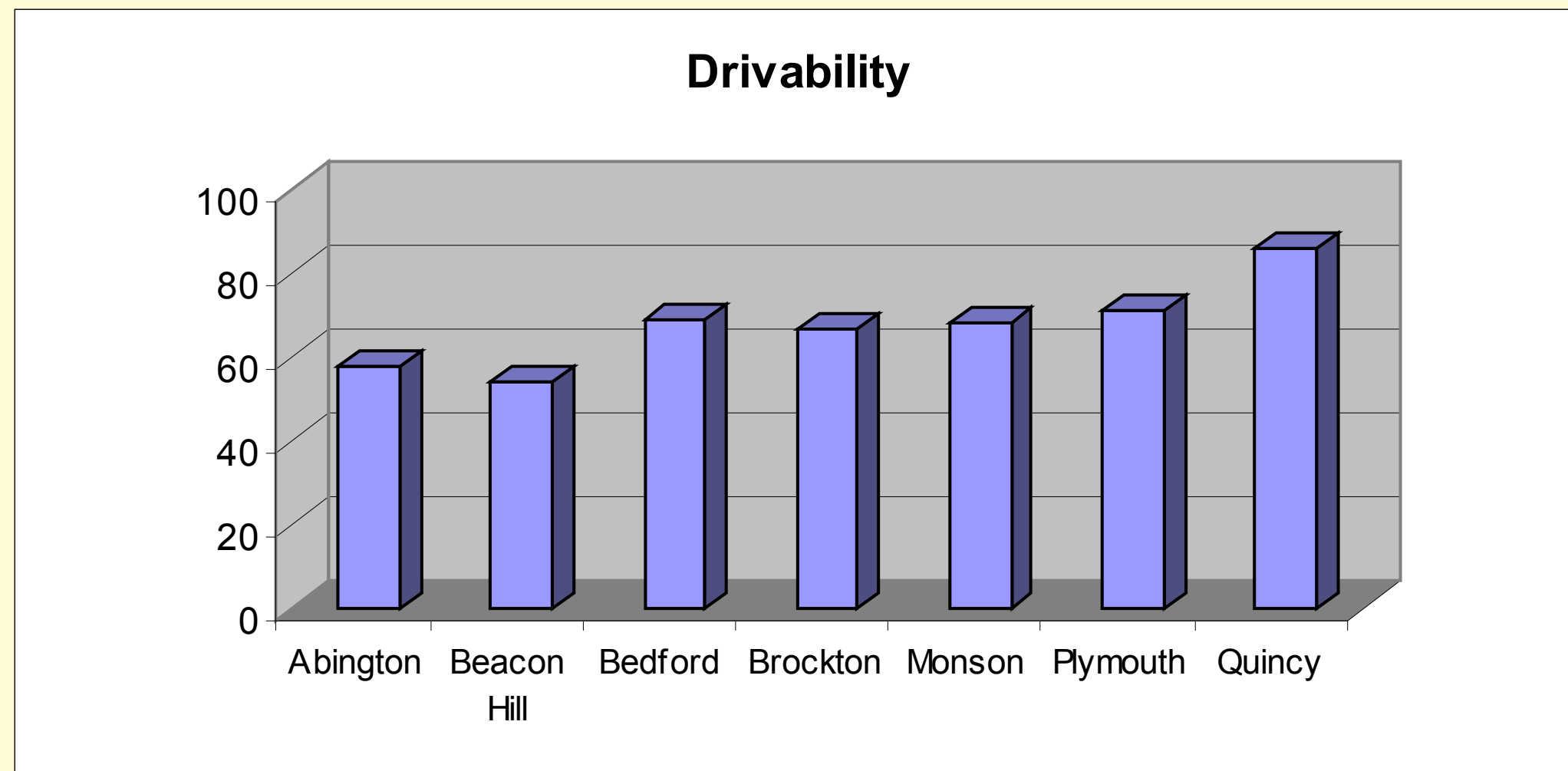
### Positive Features

- Wide variety of public facilities available: parks, golf courses, tennis courts, libraries, theaters, swimming pools, and active senior centers
- Some libraries offer services for persons with low vision and impaired hearing

- Some libraries offer air conditioned spaces for seniors to escape the heat

### Challenges

- Some communities lack heated indoor pools
- Department heads not always aware of community's recreational and cultural resources

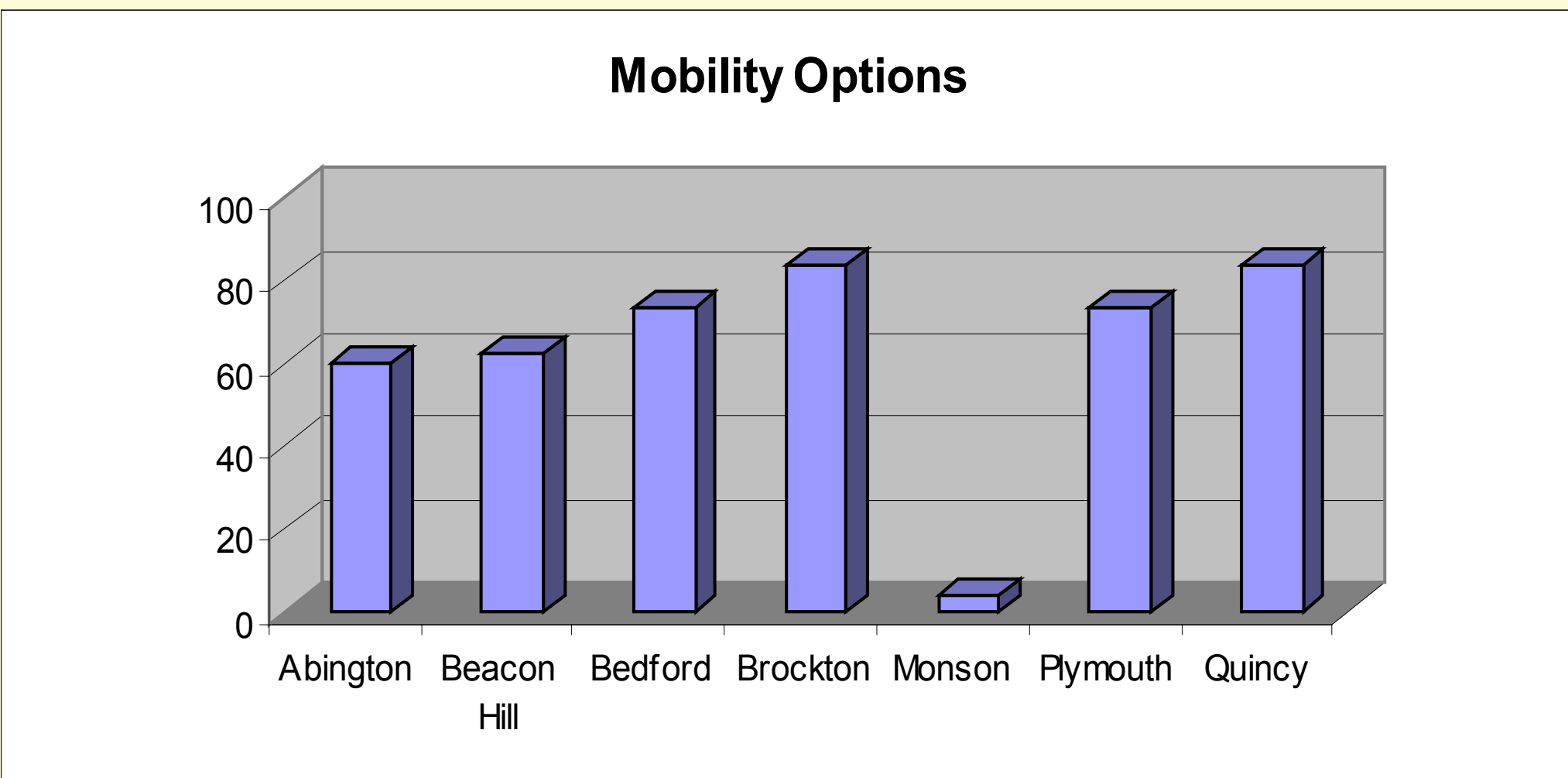


### Positive Features

- Good street lighting
- Clear, legible signs
- Ample public parking
- Ample, marked handicap parking
- Rumble strips on main roads
- Dedicated left-turn lanes

### Challenges

- Narrow, congested streets
- Poor lighting in some areas
- Insufficient reflectors to mark travel lanes
- Handicap parking not always clearly marked and monitored
- Insufficient left-turn arrows, dedicated left-turn lanes

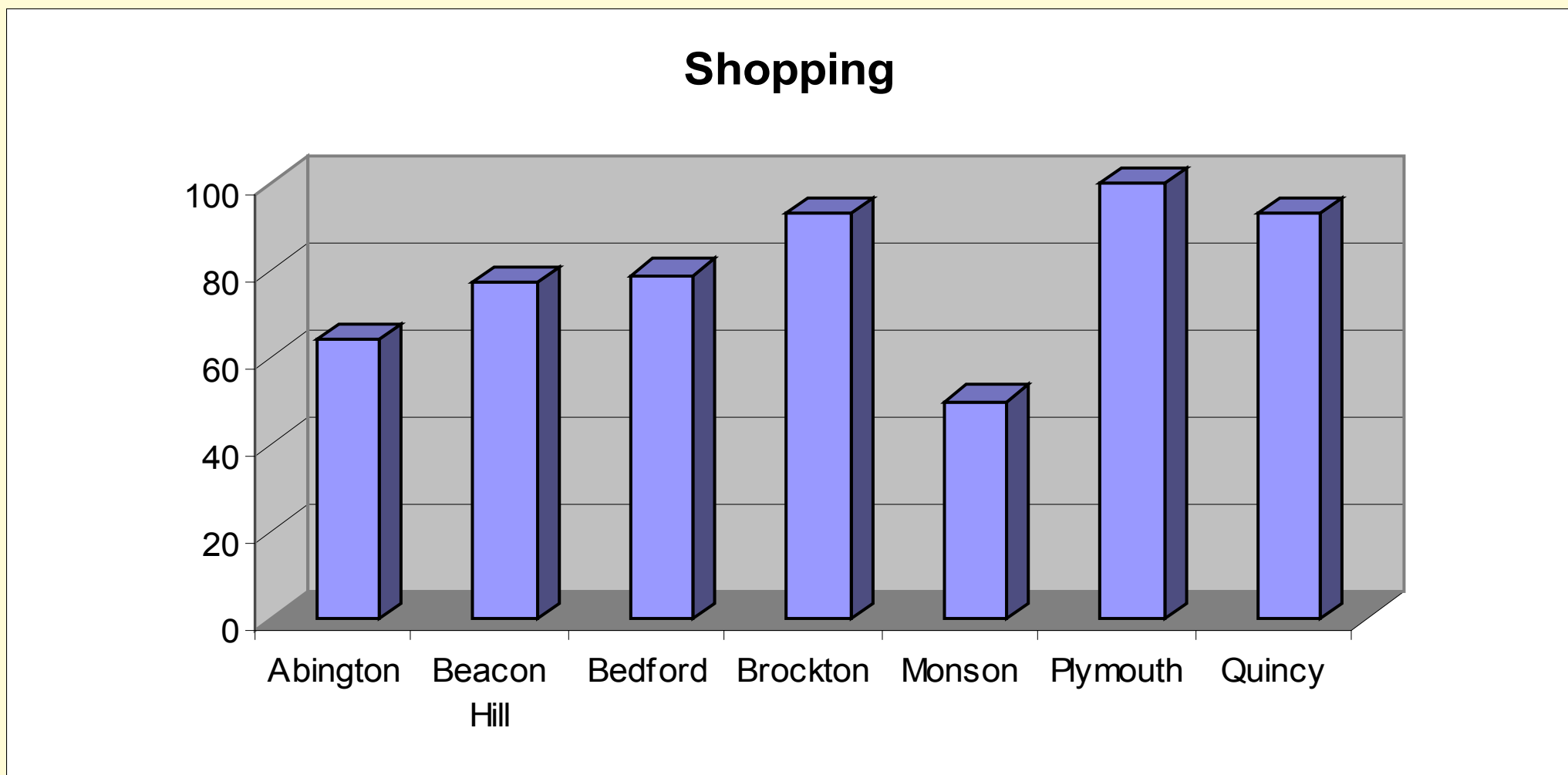


### Positive Features

- Low-cost transportation available (e.g., volunteer driver programs, dial-a-ride vans)
- Door-to-door transportation options
- Transportation services to shopping, churches, and health-care facilities

### Challenges

- Public transportation needed for weekend and evening hours
- Public transportation limited in rural areas
- "Door through door" services needed
- More bus shelters needed



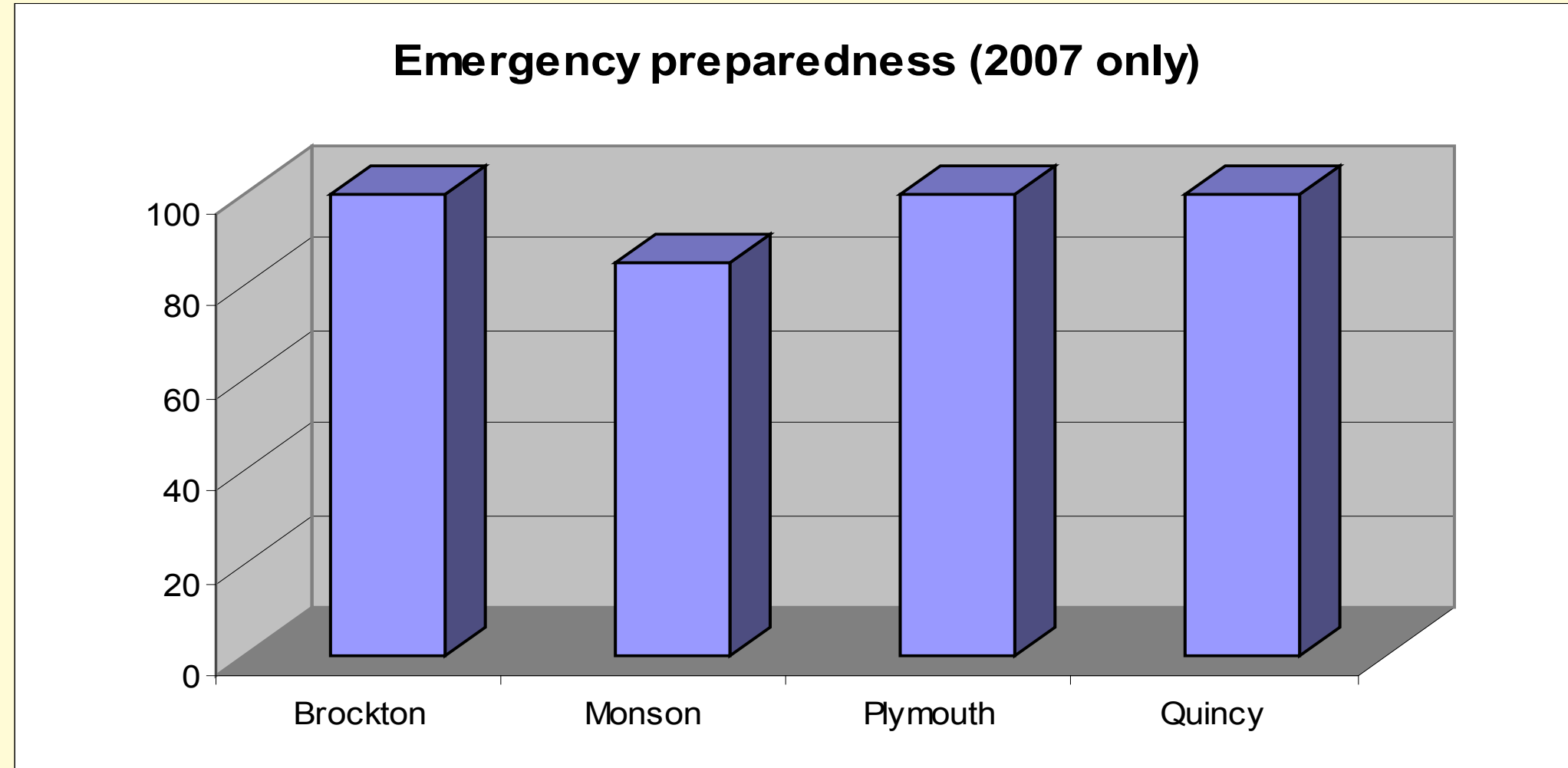
### Positive Features

- Shopping centers are conveniently located
- Public transportation serves shopping areas
- Some stores offer home delivery
- Good accessibility features in larger grocery stores (wide aisles, motorized carts, good signage,

- items easy to locate and reach)
- Shuttle services offered by groups of larger stores

### Challenges

- Not enough home delivery services
- Big-box stores and other large stores can be daunting



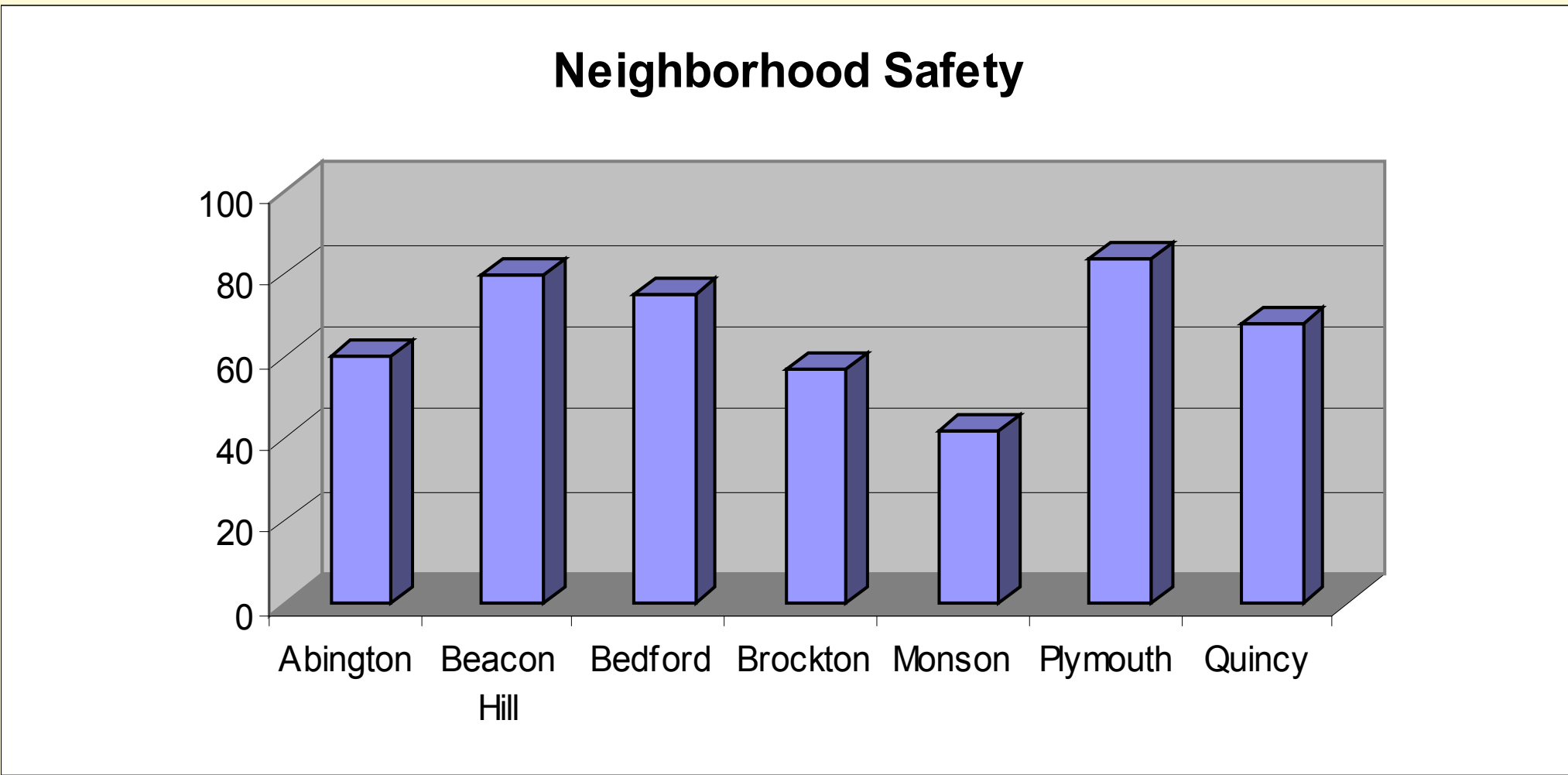
### Positive Features

- All communities have drawn up disaster plans and trained emergency personnel
- Most communities have specific plans for evacuation of older residents, especially from long-term-care facilities
- Some communities have 'Reverse 911'

- Citizen education and training is provided on disaster procedures

### Challenges

- Better communication needed between department heads concerning existing disaster planning

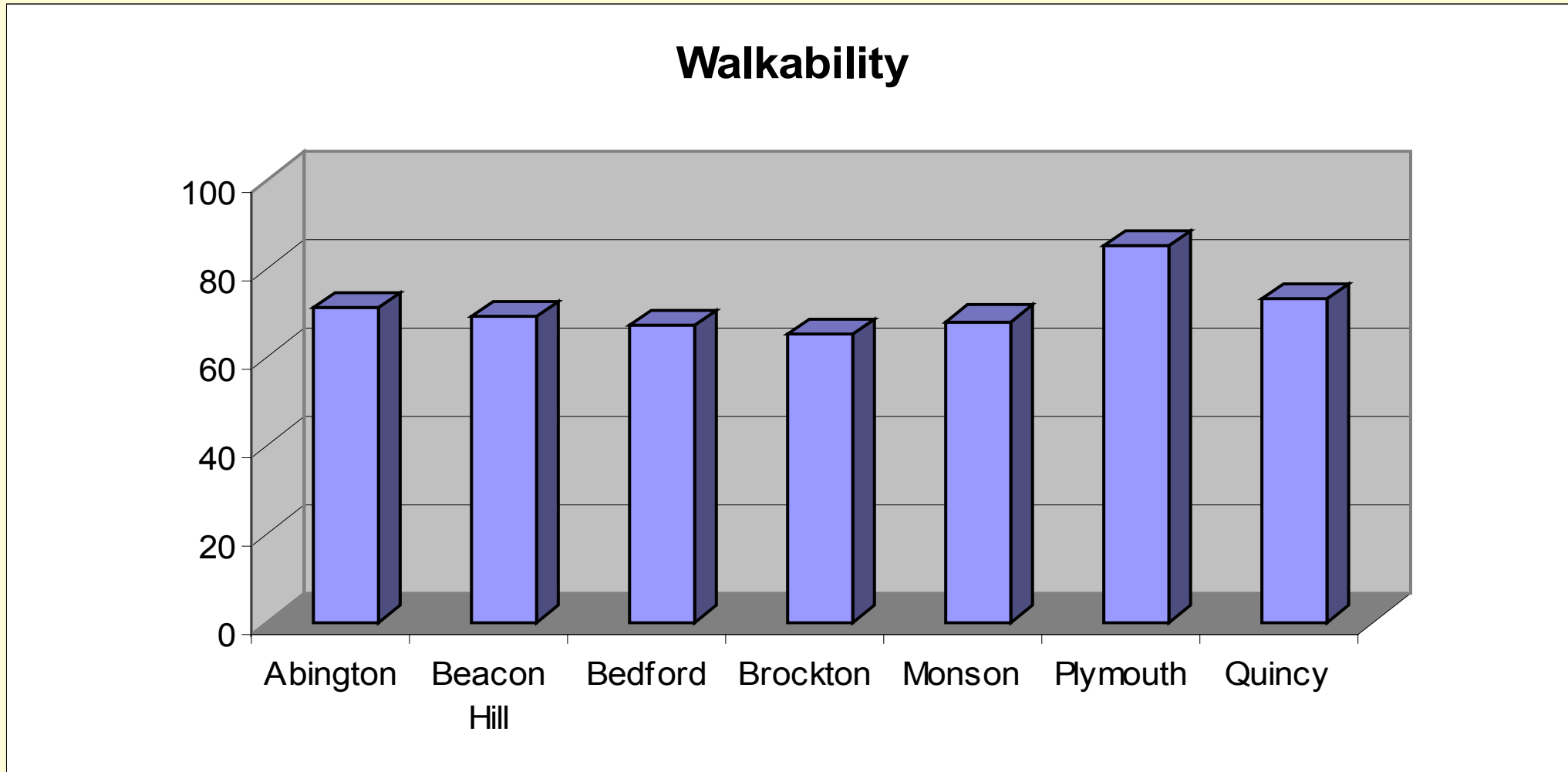


### Positive Features

- Regular police patrols
- Neighborhood Watch
- Dedicated police officer for senior residents
- Good lighting in public/private areas
- Some communities offer emergency cell phones to seniors

### Challenges

- Need for services to protect against predatory lenders, vendors, and mail fraud
- One community reduced street lighting as a budgetary measure

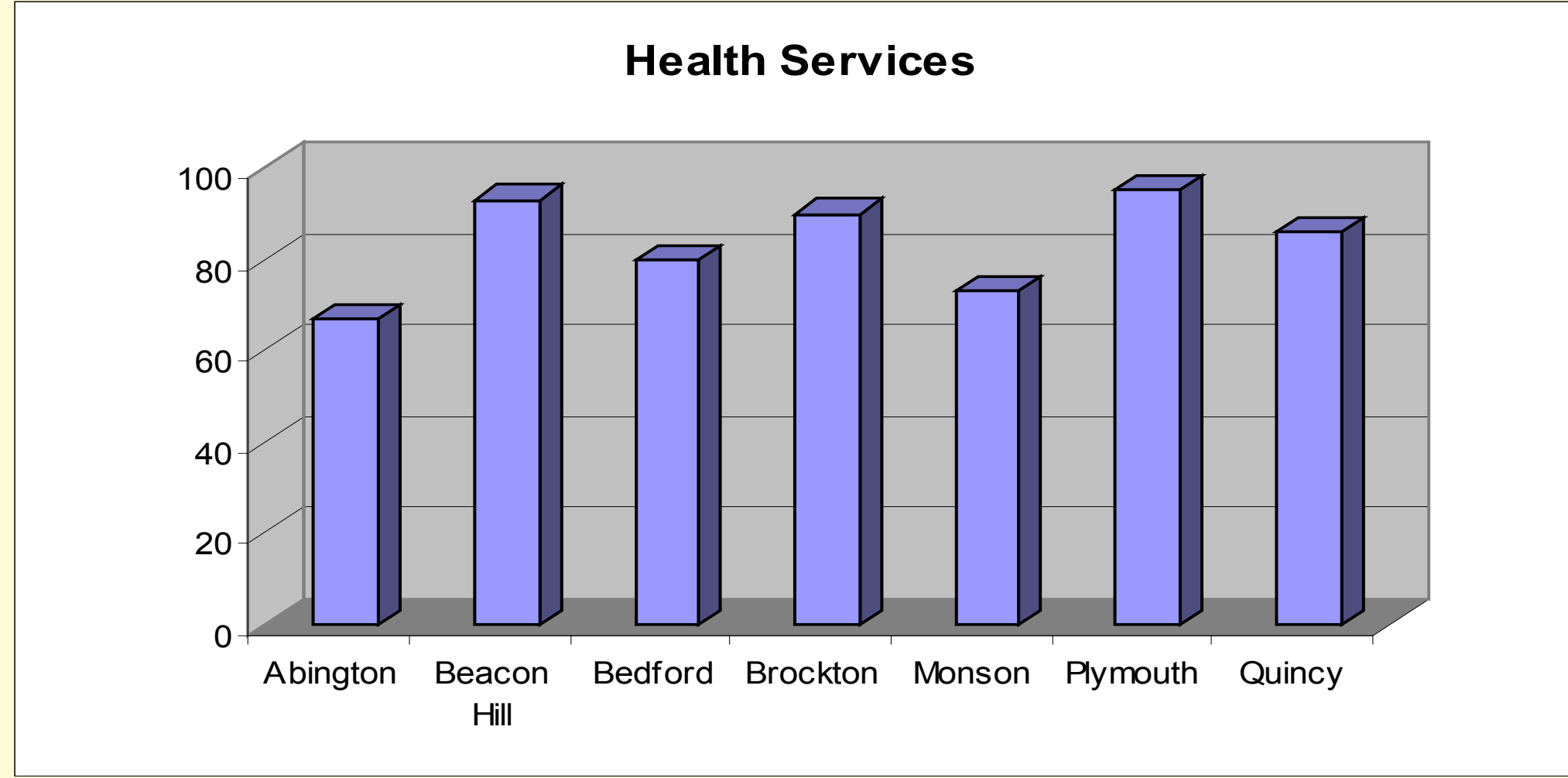


### Positive Features

- Sidewalks present in most neighborhoods
- Push-to-walk buttons at major intersections
- Traffic lights timed to allow pedestrians to cross
- Crosswalks well marked
- Textured curb-cuts installed

### Challenges

- Lack of safe walkways in parking lots
- Sidewalks not reliably cleared of snow in winter
- Benches are scarce in pedestrian areas
- Some sidewalks in poor repair
- Lighting inadequate in some neighborhoods



### Positive Features

- Medical practitioners and health services readily available
- Home health-care services available
- Some services offered on a sliding fee scale
- Preventive health services offered

### Challenges

- Insufficient mental health services
- Some pharmacies do not offer home delivery
- Some communities lack medical equipment supplier
- Some practitioners are not handicap-accessible

### Conclusions and Recommendations

- The *Livable Communities* survey:
- Proved to be a meaningful educational tool, giving students hands-on experience in developing and carrying out research, and analyzing and reporting findings
  - Raised awareness among a wide range of community service providers about their role in creating livable communities
  - Identified strengths and challenges in the focus communities for potential follow-up by community groups and agencies
  - Demonstrated the utility of AARP's *Livable Communities* tool, while identifying ways in which it could be strengthened



### Acknowledgments

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## Community Agencies Contacted for Key Informant Interviews

### Assessors' Offices

- Banks
- Boards of Selectmen
- Building Inspectors
- Churches
- Civic Associations
- Commissions on Disabilities
- Community Centers
- Community Newspapers
- Constituent Services Offices
- Councils on Aging
- Departments of Public Health
- Departments of Parks and Recreation
- Departments of Planning and Community Development
- Fire Departments
- Health Service Providers
- Highway Departments
- Local Housing Authorities
- Offices of Emergency Preparedness
- Offices of the Mayor
- Public Works Departments
- Town Managers' Offices
- Town Planning Boards



Beacon Hill Street, Boston. Photo by Yumi Nakagawa